

CHAPTER VI

THE TALE OF SOA

"My lord, I, Soa, am the servant of a white man, a trader who lives on the banks of the Zambesi some four days' march from hence, having a house there which he built many years ago."

"How is the white man named?" asked Leonard.

"The black people call him Mavoom, but his white name is Rodd. He is a good master and no common man, but he has this fault, that at times he is drunken. Twenty years ago or more Mavoom, my lord, married a white woman, a Portuguese whose father dwelt at Delagoa Bay, and who was beautiful, ah! beautiful. Then he settled on the banks of the Zambesi and became a trader, building the house where he is now, or rather where its ruins are. Here his wife died in childbirth; yes, she died in my arms, and it was I who reared her daughter Juanna, tending her from the cradle to this day.

"Now, after the death of his wife Mavoom became more drunken. Still, when he is not in liquor he is very clever and a good trader, and several times he has collected ivory and feathers and gold worth much money, and also has bred cattle by hundreds. Then he would say that he must leave the wilderness and go to another country across the water, I know not where, that country whence the Englishmen come.

"Twice he has started to go, and I with him and his daughter Juanna, my mistress, who is named the Shepherdess of Heaven by the black people, because they think that she has the gift of foretelling rain. But once Mavoom stopped in a town, at Durban in Natal, and getting drunk he gambled away all his money in a month, and once he lost it in a river, the boat being overset by a river-horse and the ivory and gold sinking out of sight. Still, the last time that he started he left his daughter, the Shepherdess, at Durban, and there she stayed for three years learning those things that the white women know, for she is very clever, as clever as she is beautiful and good. Now, for nearly two years she has been back at the Settlement, for she came to Delagoa Bay in a ship, and I with her, and Mavoom met us.

"But one month gone my mistress the Shepherdess spoke to her father Mavoom, telling him that she wearied of their lonely life in the wilderness and wished to sail across the waters to the land which is called Home. He listened to her, for Mavoom loves his daughter, and said that it should be so. But he said this also: that first he would go on a trading journey up the river to buy a store of ivory of which he knew. Now she was against this, saying, 'Let us start at once, we have tempted chance too long, and once again we are rich. Let us go to Natal and pass over the seas.'

"Still he would not listen, for he is a headstrong man. So on the morrow he started to search for the store of ivory, and the lady Juanna his

daughter wept, for though she is fearless, it was not fitting that she should be left thus alone; also she hated to be apart from her father, for it is when she is not there to watch that he becomes drunken.

"Mavoom left, and twelve days went by while I and my mistress the

Shepherdess sat at the Settlement waiting till he returned. Now it is the custom of my mistress, when she is dressed, to read each morning from a certain holy book in which are written the laws of that Great-Great whom she worships. On the thirteenth morning, therefore, she sat beneath the verandah of the house, reading in the book according to her custom, and I went about my work making food ready. Suddenly I heard a tumult, and looking over the wall which is round the garden and to the left of the house, I saw a great number of men, some of them white, some Arab, and some half-breeds, one mounted and the others on foot, and behind them a long caravan of slaves with the slave-sticks set upon their necks.

"As they came these men fired guns at the people of the Settlement, who ran this way and that. Some of the people fell, and more were made captive, but others of them got away, for they were at work in the fields and had seen the slave-traders coming.

"Now, as I gazed affrighted, I saw my mistress, the Shepherdess, flying towards the wall behind which I stood, the book she was reading being still in her hand. But as she reached it, the man mounted on the mule

overtook her, and she turned about and faced him, setting her back against the wall. Then I crouched down and hid myself among some banana-trees, and watched what passed through a crack in the wall.

"The man on the mule was old and fat, his hair was white and his face yellow and wrinkled. I knew him at once, for often I have heard of him before, who has been the terror of this country for many years. He is named the Yellow Devil by the black people, but his Portuguese name is Pereira, and he has his place in a secret spot down by one of the mouths of the Zambesi. Here he collects the slaves, and here the traders come twice a year with their dhows to carry them to market.

"Now this man looked at my mistress as she stood terrified with her back against the wall; then he laughed and cried aloud in Portuguese, 'Here we have a pretty prize. This must be that Juanna of whose beauty I have heard. Where is your father, my dove? Gone trading up the river, has he not? Ah! I knew it, or perhaps I should not have ventured here. But it was wrong of him to leave one so pretty all alone. Well, well, he is about his business, and I must be about mine, for I am a merchant also, my dove, a merchant who trades in blackbirds. One with silver feathers does not often come my way, and I must make the most of her. There is many a young man in our part who will bid briskly for such eyes as yours. Never fear, my dove, we will soon find you a husband.'

"Thus the Yellow Devil spoke, White Man, while the Shepherdess my mistress crouched against the wall and stared at him with frightened

eyes, and the slave-traders his servants laughed aloud at his evil words. Presently she seemed to understand, and I saw her slowly lift her hand towards her head. Then I knew her purpose.

"Now, there is a certain deadly poison, White Man, of which I have the secret, and that secret I taught long ago to my mistress. It is so deadly that a piece of it no larger than the smallest ant can kill a man--yes, the instant after it touches his tongue he will be dead. Living alone as she does in the wilds, it is the custom of my mistress to carry a portion of this poison hidden in her hair, since a time might come when she must use it to save herself from worse than death. Now it seemed to her that this hour was upon her, and I knew that she was about to take the poison. Then in my fear I whispered to her through the crack in the wall, speaking in an ancient tongue which I have taught her, the tongue of my own people, White Man, and saying: 'Hold your hand, Shepherdess; while you live you may escape, but from death there is no escape. It will be time to use the poison when the worst is with you.'

"She heard and understood, for I saw her bow her head slightly, and her hand fell to her side. Then Pereira spoke again:

"'And now, if you are ready,' he said, 'we will be moving, for it is eight days' journey to my little Nest on the coast, and who can tell when the dhows will come to fetch my blackbirds? Have you anything to say before you go, my dove?'

"Now my mistress spoke for the first time, answering, 'I am in your power, but I do not fear you, for if need be I can escape you. But I tell you this: that your wickedness shall bring your own death upon you;' and she glanced round at the bodies of those whom the slave-traders had murdered, at the captives upon whom they were setting chains and forks of wood, and the columns of smoke that were rising from her home, for the roof of the Settlement had been fired.

"For a moment the Portuguese looked frightened, then he laughed aloud and said with an oath, crossing himself after the fashion of his people as a protection against the curse, 'What! you prophesy, do you, my dove, and you can escape me at your will, can you? Well, we shall see. Bring the other mule for this lady, you fellows.'

"The mule was brought, and Juanna, my mistress, was set upon it. Then the slave-traders shot down such of the captives as they thought to be of no value, the drivers flogged the slaves with their three-thonged sjambochs of hippopotamus-hide, and the caravan moved on down the banks of the river.

"When all had gone I crept from my hiding-place and sought out those men of the Settlement who had escaped the slaughter, praying them to find arms and follow on the Yellow Devil's spoor, waiting for an opportunity to rescue the Shepherdess whom they loved. But they would not do this, for the heart was out of them, they were cowed by fear, and most of the head-men had been taken captive. No, they would do nothing except weep

over their dead and the burnt kraals. 'You cowards,' I said, 'if you will not come, then I must go alone. At the least let some of you pass up the river and search for Mavoom, to tell him what has chanced here in his house.'

"The men said that they would do this, and taking a blanket and a little food, I followed upon the track of the slave-drivers. For four days I followed, sometimes coming in sight of them, till at length the meat was done and my strength left me. On the morning of the fifth day I could go no farther, so I crept to the top of a koppie and watched their long line winding across the plain. In its centre were two mules, and on one of these mules sat a woman. Then I knew that no harm had befallen my mistress as yet, for she still lived.

"Now from the koppie I saw a little kraal far away to the right, and to this kraal I came that same afternoon with my last strength. I told its people that I had escaped from the slave-drivers, and they treated me kindly. Here it was also I learnt that some white men from Natal were digging for gold in these mountains, and next day I travelled on in search of them, thinking perchance they would help me, for I know well that the English hate the slave-drivers. And here, my lord, I am come at last with much toil, and now I pray you deliver my mistress the Shepherdess from the hands of the Yellow Devil. Oh! my Lord, I seem poor and wretched; but I tell you that if you can deliver her you shall win a great reward. Yes, I will reveal to you that which I have kept hidden all my life, ay, even from Mavoom my master; I will reveal to you the

secret treasures of my people, "The Children of the Mist."

Now when Leonard, who all the while had been listening attentively and in silence to Soa's tale, heard her last words, he raised his head and stared at her, thinking that her sorrows had made her mad. There was no look of madness upon the woman's fierce face, however, but only one of the most earnest and indeed passionate entreaty. So, letting this matter go by for the while, he spoke to her:

"Are you then crazed, mother?" he said. "You see that I am alone here with one servant, for my three companions, of whom the people in the kraal told you, are dead through fever, and I myself am smitten with it. And yet you ask me, alone as I am, to travel to this slave-trader's camp that is you know not where, and there, single-handed, to rescue your mistress, if indeed you have a mistress, and your tale is true. Are you then mad, mother?"

"No, Lord, I am not mad, and that which I tell you is true, every word of it. I know that I ask a great thing, but I know also that you Englishmen can do great things when you are well paid. Strive to help me and you shall have your reward. Ay, should you fail, and live, I can still give you a reward; not much perhaps, but more than you have ever earned."

"Never mind the reward now, mother," broke in Leonard testily, for the veiled sarcasm of Soa's speech had stung him, "unless, indeed, you can

cure me of the fever," he added with a laugh.

"I can do that," she answered quietly; "to-morrow morning I will cure you."

"So much the better," he said, with an incredulous smile. "And now of your wisdom tell me how am I to look for your mistress, to say nothing of rescuing her, when I do not know whither she has been taken? Probably this Nest of which the Portugee talked is a secret place. How long has she been carried off?"

"This will be the twelfth day, Lord. As for the Nest, it is secret; that I have discovered. It is to your wisdom that I look to find it."

Leonard mused awhile, then a thought struck him. Turning to the dwarf, who had been sitting by listening to all that was said in stolid silence, his great head resting upon his knees, he spoke to him in Dutch:

"Otter, were you not once taken as a slave?"

"Yes, Baas, once, ten years ago."

"How was it?"

"Thus Baas. I was hunting on the Zambesi with the soldiers of a tribe

there--it was after my own people had driven me out because they said that I was too ugly to become their chief, as I was born to be. Then the Yellow Devil, that same man of whom the woman speaks, fell upon us with Arabs, and took us to his place, there to await the slave-dhows. He was a stout man, horrible to see, and elderly. The day the dhows came in I escaped by swimming; and all the others who remained alive were taken off in ships to Zanzibar."

"Could you find your way to that place again, Otter?"

"Yes, Baas. It is a hard spot to find, for the path runs through morasses; moreover the place is secret and protected by water. All of us slaves were blindfolded during the last day's march. But I worked up my bandage with my nose--ah! my big nose served me well that day--and watched the path from beneath it, and Otter never forgets a road over which his feet have travelled. Also I followed that path back."

"Could you find the spot from here?"

"Yes, Baas. I should go along these mountains, ten days' journey or more, till we struck the southernmost mouth of the Zambesi below Luabo. Then I should follow the river down a day's journey. Afterwards two or more days through the swamps and we come to the place. But it is a strong place, Baas, and there are many men armed with guns in it; moreover, there is a big cannon, a 'by-and-by'!"

Again Leonard thought a moment, then he turned to Soa and asked, "Do you understand Dutch? No? Well I have found out something of this Nest from my servant. Pereira said that it was eight days' journey from your master's settlement, so your mistress has been there some three or four days if she ever reached it. Now, from what I know of the habits of slave-traders on this coast, the dhows will not begin to take in their cargoes for another month, because of the monsoon. Therefore, if I am correct, there is plenty of time. Mind you, Mother, I am not saying that I will have anything to do with this business; I must think it over first."

"Yes, you will, White Man," she answered, "when you know the reward; but of that I will tell you to-morrow, after I have cured you of your fever. And now I pray, Black One, show me a place where I may sleep, for I am very weary."